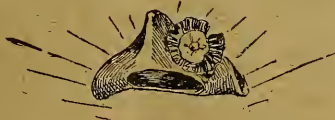


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The Preservation  
OF THE  
Historic City Hall  
OF NEW YORK.

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LETTER OF HON. ANDREW H. GREEN  
TO THE COMMISSIONERS, APPOINTED  
TO LOCATE THE SITE FOR A NEW  
MUNICIPAL BUILDING. : : : :



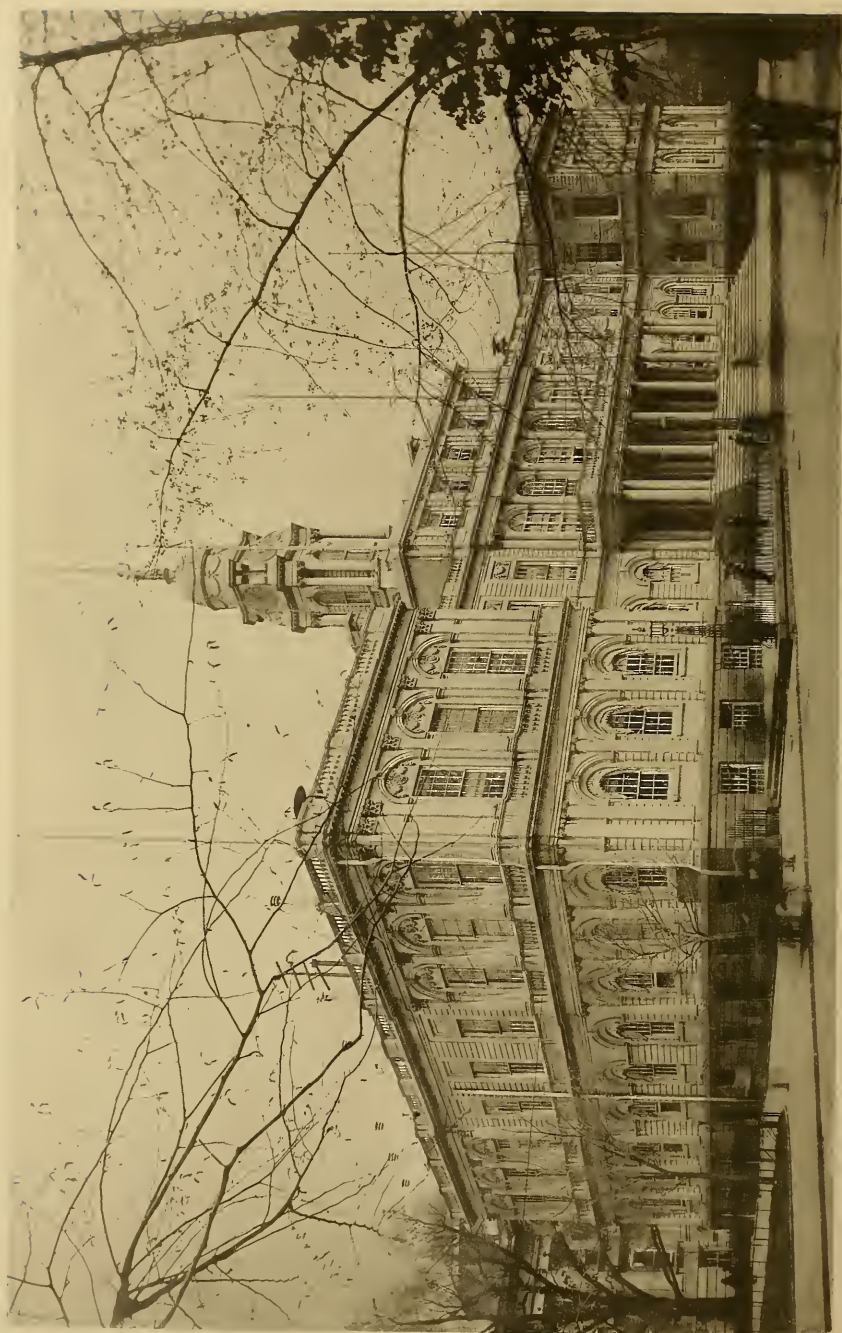
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STATE SOCIETY, SONS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION.

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1894.







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OF THE

New York State Society,  
Sons of the American Revolution.

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FOR THE YEAR ENDING FEBRUARY 22, 1894.

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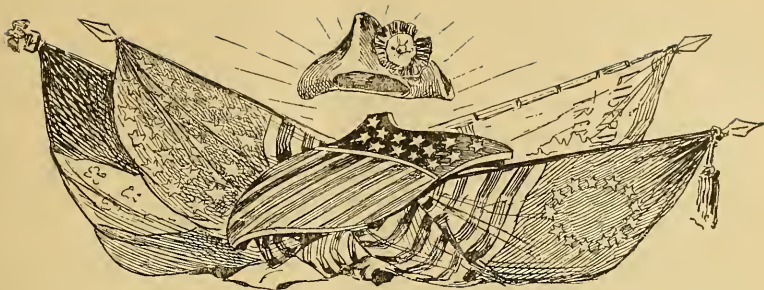
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NEW YORK, February, 1894.

*To the Commissioners appointed to locate a Site  
for a Municipal Building :*

GENTLEMEN :

As I was leaving the City some time since, for a brief absence, I noticed that a communication had been addressed to your Honorable Body on behalf of the Trustees of the Tilden Trust which, after deprecating the removal of the City Hall in the following terms, "much as we should regret the necessity of disturbing a structure consecrated to us like our City Hall by so many precious, historical and forensic associations," proceeds to propose that "should such a necessity be found to exist that admirable structure be transferred to the site now occupied by the Reservoir in Bryant Park and appropriated to the uses" of that Trust.

I fully concur with my associate Trustees, in this expression of dissent at the proposed removal of that building, as in every respect unwise. As this dissent, however, during some months past seems somehow to have ripened into their active approval and zealous advocacy of the scheme; from my past long relations with the Parks, sharing a general conviction that the area devoted to small Parks should be increased rather than deminished, I am constrained to hope that no portion of Reservoir Square, or any other Park, Square or open ground on this Island provided for the use of the people, may hereafter be appropriated for buildings.

The City Hall presents an example of fine architectural taste. In design and construction it is as faultless as any structure in the City, whilst its historical and biographical relations involve events of paramount interest and personages of dignity and estimation, and as has been well said, "It stands to-day unsurpassed by any structure of its kind in the country." It should continue to stand as for nearly a century it has stood, ample, commodious and convenient.

Its presence tends to keep alive associations that are near to very many of our citizens, a visible landmark, an object lesson to the people, that should not be destroyed.

Its erection was coeval with the conception of a group of enterprises that distinctly marks an era in the material progress of the City, the State and the Nation, among which the Erie Canal, the laying out of the City by Rutherford, DeWitt and Morris, and Jefferson's magnificent scheme of a National Coast Survey are prominent examples. Its corner stone was laid in 1803 by Edward Livingston, then Mayor, appointed as all Mayors of that period were by the Governor of the State.

Nearly ten years elapsed before it was completed.

It, and the ground upon which it stands, are memorable in the City's annals. Here upon the "Fields," or "Commons" as then known, Alexander Hamilton made his maiden speech on the occasion of closing the Port of Boston in retaliation for the destruction of the tea, and here the Sons of Liberty held their meetings to resist the assaults of the British government on the customs and rights of the people, and thus spoke:

"It's well known, that it has been the custom of all nations to erect monuments to perpetuate the Remembrance of grand Events. Experience has proved that they have had a good effect on the Posterity of those who raised them, especially such as were made sacred to Liberty. Influenced by these Considerations, a number of the Friends of Liberty in this City erected a Pole in the Fields, on Ground belonging to the Corporation, as a temporary memorial of the unanimous Opposition to the Detestable Stamp Act."

Here the Declaration of Independence was read to the American army in the presence of Washington.

Here many events of paramount interest to the Nation,

State and City have been celebrated by imposing civic and military ceremonies. Here a grand reception was given to Lafayette, and the freedom of the city, in a golden box, to that Corypheus of Democracy, Andrew Jackson, and here four generations of New Yorkers have been accustomed to witness imposing displays. The building is indissolubly connected with its site and surroundings. Remove it and interest in it vanishes.

Though with northward growth of the metropolis the City Hall is now near its southerly limit, with the sure coming of the Greater City, its present site is most central and advantageous. A million people to the right, just across the Hudson, and another million to its left, just over the East River, all within a radius of five miles, already find it accessible and convenient.

It would be strange if the Historical Society, which has been unjustifiably quoted as in favor of removing it, did not look with disapproval upon the proposal, and if the vandalism of its removal is persisted in, that Society, if true to its objects, should bend all its energies to preserve it where it is, and as it is, and I believe would promptly reject any proffer of its dismembered ruins.

While Independence Hall in Philadelphia no longer answers its original purpose, who in that City would have the effrontery to propose its removal and thus wipe out all visible insignia of its precious memories? Or who in Boston would consent to the destruction of Faneuil Hall, situated in its business centre and adorned with memorials of that City's history.

How long will it be before some, careless of the conservative influence of distinguished achievements, will want to remove Bunker Hill Monument or destroy the home of Washington at Mount Vernon? Are the principles and the works of our fathers wholly forgotten? Is that subtle, refining sentiment dissipated that delights to preserve what is left of the material environment of Shakespeare and Milton?

Are the achievements of the past to fade into oblivion? The moral power of association can scarcely be overestimated. It arouses as well the slumbering chord that responds to the inspiring strains of the "Marseillaise," awakens tender memories at the sympathetic melodies of "Sweet Home," and will always attract the thoughtful to scenes made memorable by deeds worthy of remembrance.

Other than the City Hall, where in New York is there left a public building or monument of historic value?

How long will our St. Paul's be left to us? Who would consent to the destruction of the House of Parliament in Dublin, admired for its noble simplicity, or look on with indifference while the walls of Trinity College in the same city were being laid low, that building which is a source of patriotic pride. Who would see even the ruins of Muckross Abbey scattered, or silence the bells of Shandon? Has Westminster Abbey no associations that are precious to the generations as they come and go? What would become of the citizen of Boston who would dare to propose a public building on the Common, to the consequent destruction of its "elms of centuries."

If the City Hall will not serve all the purposes now required in a municipal building, it does and will admirably accommodate very many purposes, as well apartments for important city offices, reviews, reception of distinguished visitors, the display of statues and portraits of illustrious American heroes and statesmen, and the celebration of important events. How does it happen that its usefulness ceases at this particular period? Why, if it is so soon to be removed, did a recent administration illustrate the mellow tints of its northerly front by a coat of white paint?

Considered solely as a measure of prudent economy, it should be let alone. Its dimensions would occupy more than the whole avenue front of a city block. Let it continue to be used for what it can be made useful, and if the Tilden Trust is to have it at all, let the Tilden Trust have it where it stands, and avoid the wasteful process of its removal.

To tear it down and remove it to Reservoir Square would be, to state it mildly, little short of wanton wastefulness. The stone of three of its exterior walls are about all that could be utilized, and what is left of this would have to be recut. The taking down a building of this character, in itself a costly process, with the breakage and transportation through crowded streets for three miles, would render the utilizing of its *dissecta membra* nearly as, if not more, expensive than a new structure, and when its fragments are put together, if not changed into substantially a new building, would be but a make-shift, not fit for any probable



purpose to which it would be put, and certainly not at all adapted to the needs of a library. Few who have not made a study of modern library requirements are at all aware of the progress made within the past few years in buildings for their accomodation. Very special arrangements are a necessity—to adapt a structure built for an entirely different purpose is a waste of money, and if done, entails endless expense and unending inconvenience.

Under ordinary circumstances it would be difficult to find a contractor who would take the City Hall down and remove it for the material.

Unquestionably, the city needs, and is quite able to supply, accomodations for the public business. The present housing of the invaluable records of the city is simply disgraceful. Provision for their security should have been made long ago. I agree that the vicinity of the City Hall Park, somewhere north of Chambers street, between Broadway and Chatham street, would be a proper place for the erection of a building adequate for all municipal purposes. Let the required land be purchased for it. To object to the cost of it seems trifling with the public intelligence when, by the act of removing the City Hall and the Reservoir, it is proposed to wipe out, and worse than waste, more than would be needed to purchase the necessary land.

The Post-Office should never have been placed where it is. It was as clear at the time of its building as now that its location was unwise.

How wasteful, with one hand to be occupying with buildings, public places set apart in the dense parts of the city as opens for the popular health and pleasure, and with the other to be spending large sums to provide more such places. Chapter 320 of the Laws of 1887 authorizes the expenditure of a million per annum for the increase of small parks.

Reservoir and other existing Squares are crowded in the warmer season with children and those seeking the freshness of the breezes. Not an inch of their space should be taken for buildings. If the Reservoir is to be removed, the ground upon which it stands should be left open, thus increasing its already too limited space. The City has been within a couple of years spending nearly a million to provide open ground within a stone's throw of the City Hall Park, and now it is proposed prac-

tically to close that already existing and greatly used and needed. The great business congestion in the neighborhood of the City Hall is to be aggravated by the need of more room for the throngs that cross the Brooklyn Bridge and for the increased traffic by the widening of Elm Street. Space—open space—is what is needed. The proposed new structure practically closes the City Hall Park, leaving scarcely a square rod of green.

The need for small parks about the city for breathing places cannot well be disputed. Why shut up those already existing?

While several large areas have been acquired by the City for Parks, it is interesting to look at the map of the City as devised by the Commissioners who prepared it under the act of 1807. On it were shown many small open squares. As the City advanced in population, buildings of a more or less public character were required, and several of these open spaces were seized and appropriated.

For instance, the erection of the County Court House and the Post Office in the City Hall Park, and the proposed appropriation of other portions of this Park; the entire occupancy by buildings of Hamilton Square, and of more than one part of the Battery, and the intermittent talk about the location of a building on Madison Square.

St. John's Square, though not a public ground, has been sold by a corporation, that, by what it owes to the public, should have preserved it.

The community is frequently startled by some scheme to occupy by buildings or other objectionable purpose, grounds bought by the city with the express and sole object of open space,

Take, for example, a few projects for invading the Central Park. The first was by a city regiment to appropriate a portion of it for a parade ground. This was remonstrated against by the then original State Commissioners and the Legislature passed an Act to prevent it. Next came a scheme, favored by the subsequent City Park Commissioners, of a Menagerie on one of the most beautiful of the open lawns.

Next, the attempt to bury the remains of General Grant upon the Mall.

Next, the impudent proposal to put the building of the World's Fair on the Meadows.

Next, that monstrous plan of ruin and desecration, approved by the Park Commissioners themselves, of a speedway. Later, by consent of the Park Commissioners a proposed parade of the military before the Infanta, which was stopped by a storm of popular disapproval, and recently a scheme of somebody, repudiated, as I understand, by the Academy of Design, to put a building for its purposes in the Park.

So it is that the Parks are preserved by the stand of the people against the incapacity of those employed to protect them.

It seems unwise to be expending much money to provide open places for the delectation of the people and at the same time to be appropriating greater sums to close them up. The City authorities and unreflecting persons appear to find it difficult to see all sides of the question.

Whenever ground is needed for a public building the eye falls upon the open space of a Park or Square, and it is incontinently appropriated, forgetful of the more important need of keeping it open. The proposals to use Reservoir Square for a public building will probably encounter opposition from surrounding property owners who claim the right to have it kept as a valuable appurtenant to their ownership, and that if the Reservoir is to be removed the space it occupies should remain open.

It will also have to meet the objections of those who think the square should be kept open for public out-of-door use, who support their view by challenging attention to the throngs which occupy it to get air in the hot season.

It will likewise meet opposition from those who believe it desirable to retain the Reservoir for storage of water to be used in case of fire, and claim that as it is a structure of lesser height it is not as objectionable as if it were replaced by a lofty edifice.

It is perhaps but natural that many should fail to recognize or fully appreciate the traditions and the struggles that made this an independent Republic. It is not wise to destroy the monuments that keep alive these lessons.

Visible historic memorials are objects to attract the attention and to gratify the finer feelings of every class. No one, however

illiterate or however refined, can see the ancient structures of England, Germany or France, without having his wonder excited or his thinking faculties stimulated.

One who has illustrated literature and an authority on all that concerns its advancement says:

"Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings. Far from me and from my friends be such frigid philosophy, as may conduct us indifferent and unmoved over any ground which has been dignified by wisdom, bravery or virtue. That man is little to be envied whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona."

The Biographer of the State House in Philadelphia well says:

"We must glance even at the incidents which preceded the erection of the edifice and recall those more prominent events in the history of the State and of the Nation, which, occurring under the roof or within the shadows of its venerable walls, give immortality to the very bricks and mortar.

"If, in investigating the antecedents of the State House, or in invoking the shades of its builders, we are led into details of inanimate objects otherwise trivial, we may well point to the fact that around them the all-potent power of association has set an imperishable halo whose light is now as clearly recognized in temporal as in spiritual illustrations.

"Young as our country is, the actuality, so to speak, of our founders is already losing itself in the mists of the past; so long, however, as we can preserve the material objects left to us which those great men saw, used, or even touched, the thrill of vitality may still be transmitted unbroken."

In a letter recently published Daniel Webster writes:

"I well understand how you should feel excited by visiting such places as Kingsbridge, White Plains, Bemis Heights. I never knew a man yet, nor a woman either, with a sound head and a good heart, that was not more or less under the power which those local associations exercised. It is true that place in these things is originally accidental; battles might have been fought elsewhere, as well as at Saratoga, or Bennington;



nevertheless, here they were fought, and nature does not allow us to pass over the scene of such events with indifference, unless we have a good share of bluntness and stupidity, or unless the scenes themselves have become familiar by frequent visits to them. For my part I love them all, and all such as they. An old drum hangs up in the Senate chamber of Massachusetts, taken from the Hessians at Bennington, and I do not think I ever went into the room without turning to look at it. And that reminds me to say that I have a pair of silver sleeve buttons, the material of which my father picked up on and brought away from that same field of Bennington. If I thought either of my boys would not value them fifty years hence, if he should live so long, I believe I would begin to flog him now."

Recognizing the potent influence of association, Massachusetts, to keep alive the memory of the deeds of the fathers, has recently incorporated a large number of its most esteemed citizens as Trustees of Public Reservations, "for the purpose of acquiring, holding, arranging, maintaining and opening to the public, under suitable regulations, beautiful and historical places and tracts of land within the Commonwealth" and exempting them from taxation.

If that State needs more room for the public business, it does not pull down its State House. Shall the city of New York, great in wealth, in culture, and eminent in the history of the progress of the nation, destroy its only public memorable structure? I hope not.

A brief synopsis of recent New York State legislation enacted, be it remembered, at the instance of the local authorities of this City, testifies as well to the extreme sensitiveness of the public on the subject of the removal of the City Hall, as to the occupation of the Park by any further buildings.

In 1888 the Legislature constituted a commission "to select and locate a site, conveniently situated, in the neighborhood of the County Court House Building, in said city, but not in the City Hall Park."

In 1889 the Legislature authorized this commission to "select and locate a site in that portion of the City Hall Park, in the City of New York, which lies north of the avenue running through the same, immediately south of the City Hall, from Broadway to

Park Row, and east of the walk that runs adjacent to the easterly line of the City Hall and the new County Court House."

In 1890 the Legislature authorized the Commission to "select and locate a site, conveniently situated in the neighborhood of the County Court House Building in said City, but not in the City Hall Park."

In 1892 the Legislature authorized the Commissioners, in their discretion, to "select a site for said building in City Hall Park, or on land adjacent thereto."

So, in 1888, you could not put the building in the City Hall Park. In 1889 you could put it there. In 1891 you could not put there, and in 1892 you could put it there, or on land adjacent thereto, in your discretion.

I trust that discretion may be wisely exercised. Let the City Hall stand; occupy no foot of the Park with buildings. He who, for a brief space having an authoritative voice in determining these questions, should violate the cherished sentiments of those who look to the best interests of the City and consent to the consequent waste, will have to live longer than is given to most mortals, if he shall cease to hear their execrations.

Than I, no one can be more anxious to give effect to Governor Tilden's intended benefaction to the City to which he rendered unexampled service. Recognizing as I do the propriety, the justice, of a public restoration of the means for its accomplishment that have been by public agencies so strangely diverted from Mr. Tilden's beneficent purpose, I should deem it unfortunate as one of those immediately entrusted with the execution of his intentions, to be found justifying an act that would be looked upon with disfavor by a large number of our citizens and tend to alienate many now well disposed towards the object of the Trust.

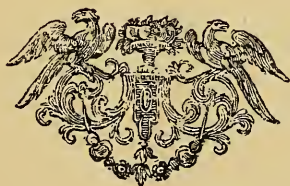
What of intended benefits to the people has been taken away from them by public authorities, should be by public authorities restored to them.

Whatever the motive, however kindly intended, if it is expected to satisfy the sense of the great injustice done to Governor Tilden through public agencies both in his life-time and to his memory, by a measure which involves the removal of this ancient edifice, it will fail to accomplish that end.

Better than the costliest monument that the opulence of the public treasury could devise, if it is to be forever associated with an offense to the worthiest of civic associations and sentiments, far better that some modest structure rise beneath the shades of the lovely valley where he first saw the light, that shall keep alive the memory of this illustrious man, and stand a perpetual reproach to the conspirators, whose schemes and whose greed disturbed his declining years and frustrated the cherished purposes of a life eminently devoted to the interests of his country.

Respectfully,

ANDREW H. GREEN.









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